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SUBJECT: LIBERAL PARTY CONVENTION WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR
CONSERVATIVES TO TOP

REF: (A) OTTAWA 640 (B) OTTAWA 696 (C) OTTAWA 713

11. (SBU) Summary: The Liberal Party Convention finished on an upbeat note March 6, trumpeting the theme of "Promises Made - Promises Delivered" for three days. The Liberals followed the model of successful American convention organizers by scripting an overwhelming endorsement of PM Martin's leadership, keeping controversy outside the tent, and using big names to draw a crowd. Of note, convention delegates voted 88% in favour of not holding a leadership convention, thereby ensuring that Martin will lead the party into the next election. There was little of substance decided on the policy side of the convention, although there was animated discussion of a number of controversial issues such as marijuana, legalization of prostitution and gender/minority rights within the party. The Liberal Party Convention will be a hard act to follow for the Conservatives, whose convention later in the month in Montreal will deal with more fundamental issues of party identity and values against a backdrop of consistently flat popularity. End Summary

WE ARE THE PARTY OF JOE CANADA

12. (SBU) As late as last week, media commentators speculated that the Liberal Party Convention would be poorly attended and tense as candidates-in-waiting lobbied for support and Martin and Chrtien supporters squared off. But for three days, the Liberals put on an excellent show, amidst a festive atmosphere flush with youthful enthusiasm. Reports indicate that 2500 delegates attended when early predictions were for a maximum of 2000. The Liberal message was clear -- &we are the party of mainstream Canada and we are capable of leading the country effectively.⁸ This message was conveyed through a skillful combination of keynote speakers, policy workshops, an accountability session with the cabinet, and a leadership review, all tightly scripted to show unity and avoid public controversy.

MARTIN PASSES LEADERSHIP VOTE COMFORTABLY

13. (SBU) A key piece of the convention was a leadership validation, in which 88% of delegates voted against holding a separate leadership convention, thus leaving PM Martin to lead the party into the next election. The Prime Minister's approval rating was better than predicted, but according to some observers it reflects a desire for party unity more than complete acceptance of Martin's leadership, and they point out that his numbers are down from the 95% he had when he first won the party leadership.

14. (SBU) There was, despite this show of support, a fair amount of speculation about who will one day succeed Martin, and while no candidates have announced their intention to try to displace the party leader in the near future, the media was still willing to speculate. The following names were mentioned as potential candidates for a future leadership challenge -- MP Maurizio Bevilacqua, MP and former Minister Denis Coderre, Minister of Public Works Scott Brison, Foreign Minister Pierre Pettigrew, Minister of Immigration Joe Volpe, Ambassador Frank McKenna, former MP and leadership candidate John Manley, former MP Martin Cauchon, author Michael Ignatieff, and Liberal Party organizer Christy Clark. Conspicuous by their absence from the convention were high-profile Liberals such as John Manley, Sheila Copps, and Jean Chrtien, presumably to avert any controversy and keep the attention on Martin.

POLICY ISSUES A SNOOZE

15. (SBU) The policy element of the convention was organized around thematic workshops in which resolutions were debated and selected to advance to the main convention floor, with some Priority Resolutions going directly to the general debate. Most of the resolutions that made it to the floor were not bold statements about new or controversial policy, and this lends some credence to media complaints that the substance of the convention was simply boring. Among the policy positions adopted were:

-- expanding the definition of marriage to include same

sex couples;
-- a commitment to ensure clean, publicly managed drinking water in the developing world;
-- meeting Canada's Kyoto target;
-- increased support for Canada's peacekeeping initiatives;
-- changes to employment insurance; and
-- the development of a national child care program.

Civil marriage caused a brief and heated debate but the debate over a resolution to mandate 50% participation of women in executive levels of the party and government was even more contentious.

16. (SBU) Also of note, the Priority Resolution against Canadian participation in Ballistic Missile Defence was dropped. Wendy Wright, an executive member of the Young Liberals of Canada, which sponsored the resolution, told POLFSN that this was because the Liberal government had already made this resolution a real policy so it was moot. Media commentators speculate, however, that they did it to avoid embarrassing debate with anti-American overtones on the convention floor. Several delegates were visibly annoyed by the withdrawal of the resolution because they wanted the policy on the Liberal books for the record regardless of what the government decided earlier. They suspect that the issue will return and they want their opposition firmly entrenched as official Liberal policy.

YOUNG LIBERALS PROMINENT

17. (SBU) Of the various convention groupings, the Young Liberals of Canada stood out. The Young Liberals demonstrated high levels of technical organization and enthusiasm while actively advancing their left of center agenda. They functioned as the largest single organized group at the convention, which was most clear in the Justice and Constitutional workshop where they successfully sponsored resolutions on legalizing marijuana and sex worker rights. Using cell-phones and text-messaging technology the YLC let their members know when their resolutions were up for debate and vote, and vehemently defended their legalization of marijuana resolution, only to abandon it at the priority stage in favour of a resolution on sex workers rights.

18. (SBU) Comment: The efforts by party organizers and leaders to convey the appearance of unity and enthusiasm, regardless of the problems that lie under the surface, have prompted some observers to call the gathering a pre-election convention, following on the heels of a pre-election budget (reftel A). While Martin has reiterated that he is not seeking an election, the endorsement of his leadership now gives him a mandate to lead the party into a second election, whenever it occurs. Meanwhile the Conservatives did not receive the bounce they were hoping for from a Liberal meltdown, and are faced with the difficult job of outshining the Liberals when they hold their first ever policy convention in Montreal March 17-19. The PM expressed more reality than spin when he said of his Conservative foes: &I don't envy them, first they've got to figure out who they are and what they stand for, and once they figure out what they stand for, they've got to figure out how to conceal it from the Canadian people.⁸ There was also some value in going first, and the Liberals simply had an easier product to sell, which they did effectively. End Comment

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